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Oregon Trails - Books

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Oregon Trails — Books

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In this paperless, information/electronic age, I must receive at least a half a dozen print magazines dealing with information technology in one or more of its manifestations. One is so filled with new acronyms each issue that I despair of keeping up, but keeping up I must, as best as I can. Every so often in one of these magazines, usually the ones associated with higher education (you have been warned), I run across an article that spells doom for the book and all print technology (this, in a slick monthly that would not even be looked at by me were in solely on a Web site). You know the kind of article I mean, the one that says that linear thinking (as opposed to cubic thinking, conical thinking, 3-D thinking?) is a thing of the past and it wasn't that good to begin with. The book is an artifact whose days are numbered because once technology comes up with a computer that needs no batteries

(will it run on moonlight from a new moon or your itty bitty bookmark light?), can be used at the beach, in the tub, in bed, on the subway or bus, and so on, who will want to bother with books?


And for those fuddy duddies who insist on a book, buy your CD-ROM-collected works of Shakespeare and, using something like Adobe Acrobat, have Kinko's or some local printer print and bind a copy for you. But publishers will no longer print and bind books or magazines. And, by the way, the authors of these articles love books but feel obliged to paint this rosy picture of the future so that ... I guess I don't know why they write them except to let us know how informed and prescient they are. Sure, they love books so much that they lie awake at night thinking of how to make them obsolete. Even old Melville Dewey once predicted that the book would be gone by 1950 or some such long since past date. It makes

you wonder about old Dewey, visionary in some ways but elitist in others. Gimme that book! Don't you know anything?

Articles like that make me tired. I used to rise to the bait, but it just isn't worth it. I get tired of reading these doomsday pieces in which the author practically chortles at the thought that books will be gone, a sort of Schadenfreude for something only imagined. Remember, virtual means almost. What I really want to talk about is books. Books, even different editions of the same work (the *Bible*, *Walden*, *Peyton Place*), have personalities. Some are overweight. Some appear bulimic. But it turns out that the skinny volume has more in it than the ponderous tome. Go figure. I remember taking an American Literature course from the late Henry Nash Smith at Berkeley during the

spring of 1970, when many university students had taken to the streets to protest the bombing in Cambodia. We were meeting in the Episcopal church on Bancroft Way, across the street from the Cal Campus. The topic was *The Autobiography of Henry Adams* and Smith wielded a copy as he lectured. It was a large, hardbound edition that nevertheless swayed in his hand like those India paper King James Bibles that certain preachers are so fond of. Books that tell you that the owner reads that book, knows that book, frequently consults that book. I can't look at a copy of that classic by Adams without thinking of Professor Nash and that living codex in his hand and the religious fervor in his voice as he explained why this book should be read and re-read and revered.

Do you ever wonder, as you thumb through the latest batch of publishers' catalogs, which works will become classics? What about the **Thirtieth Anniversary Catalog New Rivers Press 1968-1998: Outstanding Contemporary Literature?** It is a modest newsprint catalog of 24 pages with its URL on the cover. Inside, with some attractive line drawings, are forthcoming titles, bestselling fiction and poetry, and a selected backlist. There are author and title indexes and a letter, on page 22, from the publisher, C.W. Truesdale. He writes: "Dear Friends: I am writing to request your support of New Rivers Press, one of the nation's oldest nonprofit literary publishers. As publisher, I can assure you that New Rivers still encourages writers and provides assistance to them at a time when it is most needed. We celebrate our thirtieth anniversary in 1998, and I urge you to contribute to our efforts, as you may have in the past, by making a tax-deductible contribution to New Rivers." If you want to learn more about this press, I encourage you to go to www.mtn.org/newrivpr or write to them at one of the addresses below. The home page contains their whole list and lots of other information of interest. There is information for readers of fiction and poetry, for school teachers, and for booksellers.

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